

Guidelines for Raising Chickens



Adapted from "Storey's Guide to Raising Chickens" by Gail Damerow, Storey Publishing, 1995.

**We strongly recommend reading this book in its entirety before purchasing chicks or chickens.*

Chicken Basics:

Chick: A baby chicken

Cockerel: A juvenile male chicken less than 1 year old

Flock: A group of 3 or more chickens

Hen: An adult female chicken more than 1 year old

Pullet: A juvenile female chicken less than 1 year old. A chick is considered a pullet when most of its feathers have come in.

Rooster/Cock: An adult male rooster at least 1 year old

General Management

- Provide sound environment
- Feed a balanced ration
- Purchase only healthy stock
- Confine your flock
- Practice good sanitation
- Disinfect equipment used by other flocks
- Keep your chickens away from other chickens



- Keep wild birds away
- Control insects and rodents
- Medicate only when necessary
- Breed for resistance
- Keep an accurate flock history
- Minimize stress

Feeding

- The best way to make sure your chickens get a nutritionally balanced diet is to buy commercial rations. In most rations cornmeal supplies starch and soybeans supplies protein
- Chick rations contain high amounts of protein, as they grow they need less protein and more starch
- Balanced lay ration for mature hens contains 16% protein and all other nutrients needed to keep up with egg production
- In areas where the temps get very hot in the summer, 18% protein helps keep them laying when they are eating less
- If you have roosters and feed them separately, they do not need the same high protein
- Need for dietary protein goes up during molt, make this adjustment gradually to avoid stomach upset

Scratch- a mixture containing 2 kinds of grain, one usually cracked corn. Chickens love it so it has many functions:

- Train to come when called
- Trick chickens into stirring up coops bedding to keep it loose and dry
- Too much added to rations reduces birds total protein and lowers egg production and leads to feather picking
- During winter when flocks need more energy to stay warm, increase scratch ration.

Free Choice- leaving rations out at all times so chickens can eat when they wish	Restricted- feed rationed amount daily
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This saves time and ensures no chicken goes hungryBUT• Also available at all times for rodents, wild birds, & other livestock. It can also get dirty, wet, and moldy and some birds get fat this way	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More time consuming• Those lowest in peck order do not get enough to eat

Feeders- many different styles, good ones:

- Discourage billing out
- Prevent contamination from droppings
- Easy to clean
- Don't allow food to get wet

Supplements:

Grit- pebbles and large grains of sand pecked by chickens lodges in gizzard and serves as teeth to grind up grain and fibrous vegetation

- Chickens that eat only commercially prepared mash or pellets need no grit
- Range fed flocks need grit to grind up plant matter
- Yarded or pastured birds pick up grit in soil but may not be enough, granite grit should be offered

Calcium- too little leads to thin shelled eggs

• Needed by laying hens to keep eggshells strong. The amount varies with age, diet, and state of health. Older hens need more than younger hens.

- Give them ground oyster shells or ground limestone

Salt- needed by all chickens in minute amounts

- Deficiency causes hens to lay fewer, smaller eggs and to become cannibalistic
- Commercial rations have enough
- Loose salt should be available to range fed chickens

Water

- Need access to water at all times in order for body to function properly
- Each hen drinks 1-2 cups water per day, 2-4 times more in warm weather
- Need to hold enough to water flock for entire day
- Keep water clean and free of droppings
- Does not leak or drip

Housing- regardless of architectural design, there are certain essential features:

Floor Space

- Large breeds will need at least 4 square feet per bird
- Bantams should have not less than 2 square feet
- If they are confined to coop for a great part of the time, you might want to give them more space

Height

- Mostly a matter of convenience for you because you need to get in to clean and collect eggs
- As long as chickens have enough room to roost, it does not matter how high it is

Roosting

- Should be able to roost up off the ground
- Larger breed only like to be 2-3 ft off of ground, can be higher for bantams
- Should be just thick enough for the chickens to get a good grip by curling toes around
- Depending on breed, should be 12-18 inches from wall and have 5-10 inches per bird along perch
- Make sure there is no draft at roost height

Floors

- Good if raised off ground to protect from moisture
- Can be dirt, wood, concrete
- Concrete is easy to clean and discourages rodents
- Put litter on floor to absorb moisture and facilitate cleaning

Doors

- Good idea to have both chicken size doors and people size doors
- Make sure they can close and latch to protect from predators

Nesting Boxes

- Have 1 for every 4 hens
- As long as hens can get in and out with ease and isn't so cramped that she is going to break her eggs, any size will do
- Can be ground level or elevated up to 3 feet

Other factors to consider

- Some design coops with space to store feed and equipment
- Can run electricity for convenience if it gets very cold, if water freezes, if you want to put chicks in at a younger age, or if you want to stimulate laying through the use of lights
- Should completely disinfect coop at least twice a year
- Should be weather tight and draft free for winter, yet able to provide adequate ventilation for hot summer days

Weather Considerations- chickens don't need heat and air conditioning to remain comfortable all year.

They suffer less in cold weather than in hot weather

Preventing Frostbite:

- Reduce humidity by improving ventilation and removing damp litter
- Eliminate drafts
- Use heat lamps
- Feed more
- Coat combs and wattles with petroleum jelly as insulation against frozen moisture in air

Reduce Heat Stress:

- Increase water stations and frequently fill with cool water
- Ensure fresh food
- Distribute feeders so birds don't have to travel far to eat
- Encourage eating by feeding early in the morning
- Increase air movement (fans or windows)
- Eliminate crowded conditions
- Provide shade
- Do not disturb during heat of day
- Hose down coop roof and outside walls several times a day

Peck Order governs a flock's social organization

- Complex hierarchy with 3 levels: among cocks, among all hens, between cocks and hens
- Dominant cocks mate more often than lower ranking cocks but submissive hens mate more
- Chicks start sparring at 6 weeks but once the pecking order is established the fighting should be minimal
- Can reduce the stress among flock by helping them maintain stable pecking order
- Give them plenty of room to roam as the lower rank need space to get away
- Design housing with enough variety so timid birds find a place to hide
- Provide enough feeders and waterers so no bird has to pass through another's territory
- Avoid disturbing peck order by introducing new chickens into flock

Cannibalism

- Can be caused by boredom, overcrowding, or nutritional deficiencies
- Often start by picking toes or even the base of the tail or vent
- Any sort of injury with blood starts picking
- Bloodied or injured bird needs to be removed until completely healed, as does the aggressive bird
- Red light bulb in brooder can be helpful because it diffuses the red of blood, making it difficult to notice
- Anti-picking preparations
- Debeaking
- Individual caging

Molting- when chickens lose their old feathers and re-grow new ones

- Usually occurs in the fall
- Sometimes it happens gradually that you hardly notice, other times they suddenly become bare

- During molt, make sure they have a good diet with plenty of protein so they are able to build new feathers (which are mostly protein)
- They tend to lay less, or not at all during the molt
- Don't get the molt confused with feather loss due to mating, mites, or feather picking

Health Management

Avoid potential disease problems by being constantly aware of flock's health.

- Appearance- healthy chickens are perky and alert, have full waxy combs, shiny feathers, and bright eyes.
- Activities- are active, peck, scratch, dust, preen, or meander almost constantly, except on hot days when they rest in the shade.
- Sounds- they talk or sing throughout the day, you should not hear coughing or sneezing.
- Production- an inexplicable decline in production or egg quality may be a sign of disease.
- Consumption- by paying attention to how much your chickens normally eat and drink you will notice changes brought on by stress or disease.
- Weight- any inexplicable loss in weight may be a danger sign.
- Odor- a healthy flock has a particular odor. Be aware of that odor so you will notice any changes.
- Droppings- any change in the normal odor or appearance of droppings is a good indicator of disease.

Egg Eating

- Can start when a hen accidentally breaks her eggs and tastes how good it is
- Usually a calcium deficiency which is how egg got broken in first place (it was thin from lack of calcium)
- Can be result of boredom
- Collecting eggs several times a day can alleviate problem
- Remove guilty hen and feed her plenty of good things to eat so she forgets about eggs
- Hard to stop once it starts so may have to get rid of persistent egg eater

Egg Binding- eggs get stuck in hen's oviduct often leading to death

- She will be sluggish and ruffle her feathers, her abdomen will be distended, and you will be able to feel the eggs inside
- Lubricate the oviduct with mineral oil or petroleum jelly as far as you can reach and ease eggs down
- Put her under heat and they sometimes come down on their own
- Problem may occur again
- Not typically a problem with good diet

Decrease in Laying

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving hens to unfamiliar location • Changing feed or feeding times • Extreme changes in temperature • Molt | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hot weather • Inadequate diet and water • Should be more concerned if stop for no apparent reason during mild weather |
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Mites and Lice

- Can be brought in by wild birds or rodents
- Easily spread
- Can usually be seen on the underside of the belly and around the vent
- Can see crawling around litter or nest boxes
- Some only come out of cracks and corners to bother chickens at night
- Natural dust baths help eliminate these pests
- Provide them with dust bins (diatomaceous earth) if natural dusting is not available
- Sprays available

Scaly leg mites can be brought in by wild birds that cause the scales on the shanks to stick out and flake off

- Can be crippling to chickens (May have to cull chickens with scaly leg mites)
- Brush legs with one part kerosene, 2 parts linseed oil, once a month
- Try camphor/menthol products or commercial leg mite products